New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1949

Volume X, Number 15 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of May 16, 1949

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK SUN

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"Gayden"

DAILY NEWS

MAY 11, 1949

Young 'Gayden' Is a Beastly One Who's the Image of Dorian Gray

By ROBERT SYLVESTER

It is always worthwhile to watch a veteran pro in action and when you're watching one as handsome as Fay Bainter, who's doubtless the best dressed woman in the theatre if not in the country, no evening in the theatre can be entirely wasted.

Miss Bainter is the star of a mild melodrama called "Gayden" which took an indeterminate lease on the Plymouth last night. It was a pleasure to watch her weave and feint, riposte and parry, and for a short stretch or two make things look a lot more promising than they were. From the first, she had her work cut out for her. "Gayden" starts out like this:

The curtain goes up on a handsome set by Willis Knighton. An ingenue named Carol Wheeler is sitting in the middle of it. Enter a maid named Hazel Jones. Maid pours tea. Maid answers the telephone. Enter Miss Bainter. Then—nothing.

The Grisly Gayden.

Miss Bainter, it develops immediately, is the mother of Gayden. The best way to describe Gayden would be to assume that he is misplaced from the title role of "Edward, My Son." Everybody knows Gayden is a louse except Gayden and, much later, his mother. When mother finally accepts the truth she also, reluctantly but probably sensibly, accepts the fact that there is not much she can do about it.

This season has had its share of odd juveniles and the writer is admittedly a crank on the subject, but it seems as if Jay Robinson's Gayden is the last straw. Maybe it's the writing of the character by authors Mignon and Robert McLaughlin. Or maybe it's just Mr. Robinson.

"Do you play chess?" he first demands. "Do you like poetry?" he suggests, as the poor girl weakens. "Have you read any filosofy?" he puts in as the clincher. Pretty soon the silly girl is doing all these things and, worse, listening to Gayden's own poetry which is considerably worse than most.

The Road to Ruin.

This way he has ruined several long-gone girl friends, sent that pretty Gloria Stroock into a tailspin, pushed somebody's kid off a roof, depressed his doctor uncle no end, and brought Carol Wheeler, a graduate of the more wholesome atmosphere in "Life With Father," to the very brink of a fate worse than death. Clay Clement has one good scene as the doctor and Miss Wheeler is pretty and highly capable as the girl who finally finds out.

Perhaps this writer's sudden hatred for Jay Robinson and his portrait of Gayden has an unfair personal angle. In the last act Robinson admits that he has taken the girl to Montauk Point. Lousing up a wonderful place like Montauk is enough to infuriate any pure minded surf fisherman.

"GAYDEN"

Play by Mignon and Robert McLaughlin; staged by Lex Richards; setting by Willis Knighton; costumes by Emeline Roche; presented by Gant Gaither at the Plymouth Theatre, May 10, 1949. The cast:

Emily Archer....Carol Wheeler
Agnes.....Hazel Jones
Grace Sibley.....Fay Bainter
Dr. Ned Whitaker..Clay Clement
Gayden Sibley.....Jay Robinson
Polly Dalton.....Gloria Stroock

Synopsis: The action of the play takes place in the Sibley house, New York 21, N. Y. The time is the present. Act I. Scene 1. A day in early July. Scene 2. The following afternoon. Act II. Scene 1. An evening, six weeks later. Scene 2. Midnight, the same night.

Journal-American

MAY 11, 1949

Fay Bainter Is Fine; The Play Confusing

By ROBERT GARLAND

Few playgoers will deny that "Gayden" is fascinating. But even with Fay Bainter in a far from mediocre cast, the titular character is a long time coming into focus.

As a motivator of his fellow make-believers, you have no actual idea what young Mr. Sibley is getting at until after the rising of the last act curtain at the Plymouth.

This is not helpful to Mignon and Robert McLaughlin's undeniably fascinating play which Gant Gaither produces with Miss Bainter coming home to be its star.

If, earlier, you were permitted to recognize Grace Sibley's offspring as the monster he is, his growth in monstrousness would add to the enticement.

This you are not permitted. For two scenes of the piece's four, Gayden is more irritating than interesting, a posey young lady-killer without masculine allure.

Then, all of a sudden, his doctorial uncle classifies him as a constitutional psychopath instead of the Casanovian couturier he gives every evidence of being.

Then, and not before, "Gayden" picks itself up, pulls itself together and comes into its own. Then, and on to the final curtain, it is worth Fay Bainter's while.

• • •

Stunning Outfits

Laid in the lovely Willis Knighton drawing-room of Grace Sibley's Manhattan mansion, the lady is a high-toned Peggy Gibbons in stunning Hattie Carnegie outfits.

She, like the dotty, doting mother in the late tenant of the Music Box, can see, hear or think no evil of her solitary offspring who is the equivalent of Mrs. Gibbons' three.

This son, the Gayden of the title, could represent the fatal curse of culture. For a while, you think that something less cultural may ail him. But no, not he!

An overly euphemistic monster, a constitutional psychopath, as his Uncle Edward words it, he destroys each male and female of the species that comes his way.

Especially the female! Having worked out the destruction of a couple of off-stage ladies, the McLaughlins play sets him to work upon another.

She is Emily Archer, an off-island relative of the Sibleys who comes East to live with Gayden's mother under the belief that Gayden will be away from home.

But Gayden is home. There, he plays chess with his mother and havoc with his mother's bucolic visitor. Like Mrs. Alving, Mrs. Sibley is stuck with her offspring at the end.

• • •

Fay Is Wonderful

Fay Bainter is as welcome as she is wonderful as Grace Sibley, Ibsenesque mother to a human monster who gets his luggage from Paragon and his accent from Albion.

Miss Bainter, absent from New York since 1945, is still one of America's finest three-dimensional performers. Her acting at the Plymouth is assured and sustained.

Clay Clement is himself as Uncle Edward. His "Ghosts"-like scene with Mrs. Sibley is well acted. Gloria Stroock, as Polly Dalton, is easier on eye than ear.

Carol Wheeler is as she should be as Emily Archer. But, although you hear each word the McLaughlins give her, they are not always easy to understand.

But the young Mr. Sibley of Jay Robinson is the disturbing factor of "Gayden" as a play. From either miscasting, misdirection or inexperience, his is not the constitutional psychopath required.

Once you learn what this Mayfair monster is up to, his negative Oscar Alving is at least understandable. Before that, you wonder just what is eating him.

Back at the beginning, few playgoers will deny that "Gayden" is fascinating. And it does return Fay Bainter to Broadway, where she most certainly belongs.

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune

MAY 11, 1949

By OTIS L. GUERNSEY JR.

Just Misses

A FAINT strain of eerie psychological melodrama runs through "Gayden" at the Plymouth, but it is always just a little too elusive to catch. Written by the husband and wife team of Mignon and Robert McLaughlin, the new play moves into the Sibley residence at New York 21, New York, and finds a young, urbane constitutional psychopath living cruelly and in pampered luxury with his unsuspecting and doting mother. The son, played by Jay Robinson, smiles and is yet a villain in a drama of gradual character revelation, and Fay Bainter is the mother who changes from sympathy to disbelief to stern command. Subtle and keen in concept, "Gayden" as presented here does not have the light, sure touch of execution which might have resulted in a sharp-edged summer thriller.

* * *

The McLaughlins' script is the sort of work which is either an exquisitely mannered tableau of evil or is nothing at all. Its central character, Gayden Sibley, is imagined as a young man of great charm and no conscience who amuses himself with attracting and then destroying all who come into contact with him. As played by Robinson, he is too obvious a whisker-twirler to fool any one; too weak to be convincingly dangerous, and far too fragile to demonstrate hidden power in the climaxes. Always the play itself is strong enough, at it watches Gayden working on a shining faced country lass and sees a suspicious doctor moving in on Gayden, to generate interest and curiosity in what is going to happen next. Never is it well enough served to develop this thin thread of menace into a full-bodied and full-styled drama of intellectual suspence.

* * *

The staging by Lex Richards moves the characters about smoothly enough in a play composed largely of conversation in good dialogue. It does not, however, have the much-needed quality of delicacy; one finds the actors resorting to overemphasis, ideas being shouted that ought to have been presented in whispers. Miss Bainter's calm presence on the stage is an anchor to windward in many scenes, and her appearance as the mother is another pleasant and well controlled performance. But she is sometimes left with nothing to depend on but her own familiar mannerisms, in a show which holds great promise but never is able to find itself.

* * *

Carol Wheeler does well as the fresh, windblown girl from Pennsylvania who succumbs in spite of herself to the Gayden charm and allows herself to be restyled and re-educated, to her eventual heartbreak. Clay Clement is the doctor who exposes Gayden for what he is, and Hazel Jones adds a touch of color as a maid who hero-worships the young master of the house. The production is well dressed on a small set designed by Willis Knighton. It is easy to see why producer Gant Gaither might have considered "Gayden" a potential frame for graceful, insidious villainy. But at the Plymouth the play is distracted with the image of Gayden pointing a fencing foil at the audience to indicate that he has wicked thoughts.

The New York Times

MAY 11, 1949

Fay Bainter as Mother of a Sadist in a Drama Entitled 'Gayden'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Everybody has gone to a lot of trouble to make "Gayden" as horrifying as a modern "Ghosts." Mignon and Robert McLaughlin have written the story of a "constitutional psychopath" and his indulgent mother with what is probably scientific accuracy. Fay Bainter has returned to New York to play the part of the mother. Although the setting is pompous it is no doubt expensive, and Emeline Roche's costumes are not only expensive but stunning. There is even a quotation from Swinburne in the program to affix the cachet of literature on this case history of a mentally sick young man.

* * *

But still it is impossible to escape the conviction that the new play, which opened at the Plymouth last evening, is only a pedestrian thriller about a singularly unpleasant young man. Gayden Sibley is obviously a problem for his mother, but he is not a problem that a theatregoer has to take over quixotically. If his uncle, a trained man of medicine, did not describe him as a "constitutional psychopath," most of us would regard him as a sadist. He fascinates people for the purpose of destroying them. Or, so the authors contend on the basis of a long and morbid history.

But in Jay Robinson's willing acting of the part, Gayden is loathsome enough to sound his own warning, and nobody who is not a character in the play is likely to be fascinated very much. As an unfortunate houseguest, Carol Wheeler has to pretend to be fascinated and scientifically destroyed, which she does very prettily in some fetching gowns. Gloria Stroock, wearing a smart frock, plays the part of one who has just been fascinated and destroyed and is now very thoroughly upset. As the licensed physician, Clay Clement has to take the objective and reproving point of view.

* * *

Miss Bainter is an alert and warm-hearted dramatic actress of a quality that must be respected. She could not play the mother in "Ghosts" with more emotion and skill. But "Gayden" is a literal, self-contained piece of work. The authors appear to be as fascinated by the sadist they have invented as his many victims are. "Gayden" is not worth all the pride and sincerity Miss Bainter has poured into it. Those whom Gayden does not fascinate can get unscientifically bored.

New York World-Telegram

MAY 11, 1949

'Gayden' Bows In At the Plymouth

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Fay Bainter lends grace and great theatrical authority to a peculiarly unsatisfying play in "Gayden," latest and next to last of the season's openings.

As a psychological study the play is badly addicted to avoiding coming to grips with its problem. It concerns the practice of evil by indirection, and denies itself impact by revealing the practice only when it is unsuccessful.

The active story is simple. A wealthy widow who hated her husband completely spoils her brilliant dilettante of a son.

It is her doctor brother who first calls her attention to the consistent fatalities among young Gayden's associates. His cousin hanged himself after rooming with him at college. A youngster fell off a roof while playing follow the leader with him. A girl he knew tried to asphyxiate herself, and another girl had left her husband only to be spurned by Gayden.

Works on Guest.

Now this charmer is at work on a young girl his mother has invited to stay with them on her way to her wedding in South America. Gayden turns her into a superficial sophisticate for his own amusement.

Facing the truth of what he is, a cruel and hopeless psychopath, the widow sends the girl away but is incapable of doing anything about the boy.

Thus the play has the serious fault of ending up just where it started. Furthermore there is no real tension or excitement about all this until the last scene when the mother and son square off and face things. Even here, despite some breathless moments, there is conflict with no actual threat or suspense.

Lacking in Rhythm.

Until this last scene there is hardly a speech in the script more than one line long. This results in the dialogue lacking any rhythm whatsoever, and forces the actors into staccato readings that eliminate any ominous atmosphere.

The star contributes an utterly convincing picture of a distraught mother, and wears a series of exquisite gowns. What should have been her big scenes are distressingly underwritten, so that the tension underlying the role, through no fault of hers, seems a volcano that never erupts.

Jay Robinson plays the son with the calm suavity the part needs. The revelations of his twisted nature are understated and effective, adding an admonitory air to the latter sequences beyond the statement of the scripts. If from the point of view of age and physical gravity he is hard to accept as a Casanova, it is no more his failing than it is Miss Bainter's that she has no rich speeches peaking the whole situation, into which she can dig her teeth.

As Gayden's current prey, Carol Wheeler adds fresh and natural charm to an intelligent reading of her speeches.